White Paper

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Narrative

Overview

Chapman University was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities Foundations grant (PW-228297-15) in April 2015. The grant was funded at the level of $39,850 to support efforts in processing, digitizing, and sharing the letters in Chapman University's Center for American War Letters (CAWL) Archive.

This White Paper seeks to summarize the lessons that our digitization team learned while executing the *Plan of Work* that was outlined in the original grant proposal submitted in July 2014. After a brief *Introduction* to the project and a review of the *Plan of Work*, this White Paper will cover the following areas: Letters in the Classroom, Pilot project: Classroom-based Transcription, Advisory Board Workshop and Outcomes, and Ongoing Evaluation.

Introduction

Chapman University's CAWL archive is a unique and extensive manuscript collection of approximately 80,000 previously unpublished war letters from every American conflict, beginning with handwritten missives composed during the Revolutionary War and continuing up to emails sent from Iraq and Afghanistan. These personal war-time correspondences are a vital record of the collective memory of the American people, as witnessed and articulated by service members, veterans, and their loved ones who experienced these wars firsthand.

The Leatherby Libraries has organized a team of librarians, archivists, and graduate students—students drawn from the English and the War and Society programs in Chapman University's Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (WCAHSS)—for a multiyear project to digitize the letters of the Center for American War Letters. Founding Director Andrew Carroll recently (April 1, 2017) launched the Million Letters Project, and Leatherby Libraries has been receiving hundreds of letters daily since then. As the collection continues to increase in size, the need for digitizing and disseminating the letters also grows.

CAWL is an unparalleled primary resource for Chapman University. It has attracted scholars from some of the most cutting-edge humanities research programs in the United States, including the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH) at the University of Maryland, College Park. CAWL is also a foundational research collection for use in Chapman University's 21st-century classrooms: the print collection supports traditional scholarship, while the digital artifacts can be and are increasingly used in the Digital Humanities curriculum, which uses computational tools, techniques, and processes to support traditional and innovative modes of humanistic and artistic inquiry and production.

In addition to supporting the research and teaching efforts at Chapman University, our effort to digitize these materials is a part of our institution's commitment to share these stories with the American citizenry. In effect, these letters were a gift to us from the American service men and women who wrote them, and we want to be good citizens by returning the favor in the most

effective possible manner.

The creation of this White Paper was a part of our original *Plan of Work* (provided in the next section as an exemplification of the scope of our Foundations grant project) to give the project participants an opportunity to share our lessons learned.

Plan of Work
The grant proposal specified the following activities to be performed during the grant period:

1) Identify conservation issues with items in collection.
2) Complete preliminary finding aid and planning for final processing.
3) Identify collections totaling 2,000 pages that are suitable for digitization.
4) Digitize these 2,000 pages in-house using the lessons learned from the pre-grant activities.
5) Develop and conduct a War Letters Workshop.
6) Craft a vision for dissemination of digital content, including Digital Humanities pedagogical tools.
7) Create Copyright/Intellectual Property (IP) decision model.
8) Create a white paper on best practices/lessons learned from the project.
9) Present findings at an academic conference.

Letters in the Classroom

The members of the CAWL team wanted to place the physical letters and their digital representations in front of students as soon as was practicable. This desire was motivated both by the fact that, as academics, we recognize the importance of working with primary sources, and also by the fact that this would directly address part of the *Plan of Work*, item 6) Craft a vision for dissemination of digital content, including Digital Humanities pedagogical tools.

The CAWL materials are used in a very traditional scholarly manner in a graduate-level seminar in the Chapman University War and Society program. In this course, each graduate student selects a personal letter collection (from any war) and works with that collection to develop an article-length paper suitable for presentation at a professional historical conference or to submit for publication in an historical journal. To complete this assignment, the students are required to complete a comprehensive datasheet that is an inventory of pertinent details in each letter, including topics and key evidentiary statements. Students may decide whether or not to also transcribe the letters. This assignment is designed to help students learn to manage a large amount of primary source material and to organize it effectively. These students build out from the letters to collect other pertinent primary sources including newspapers, government documents, memoirs, and genealogy. They also consult secondary sources for context and to situate their work within the proper historiography. One student in last year's class, Lauren Cruz, was the winner of the best graduate paper prize at the Southern California regional Phi Alpha Theta conference for the paper that she completed for this seminar.

The professor for this class, Dr. Jennifer Keene, who is also a Humanities Advisor for this grant, has said the following about using CAWL materials for instruction:

CAWL gives our students a unique opportunity to learn and practice the skills of historical research. By working collectively in these materials, they learn from each other as they encounter the challenges and triumphs of archival research. It is an outstanding resource and has become integral to both the undergraduate and graduate history curriculum.

The letters in the CAWL collections are also of great interest to digital scholarship. For the past two academic years, materials and processes from the CAWL digitization effort have been used in English 484/584: Introduction to Digital Humanities. The course is taught by grant investigator Dr. Jana Remy. Course evaluations have frequently revealed that this hands-on introduction to the basics of a digitization program—including discussions of the limitations of Optical Character Recognition (OCR) of digitized materials and an overview of the transcription process—is the part of the course that the students enjoy the most.

Our belief that the materials in the CAWL archive would serve as an important pedagogical foundation for the classroom, for both undergraduate and graduate students, has been confirmed. Integrating the CAWL materials into the classroom has also had a profound secondary benefit: it has demonstrated to the university's administration the value of provocative, unusual primary resource collections like CAWL.

Pilot Project: Course-based Transcription

The size and scope of the materials present in the CAWL archive make the prospect of transcribing each page of every letter a daunting prospect. Early on in the digitization project, it was suggested that the transcription work done by undergraduate students in History courses be incorporated into the project's workflow. A pilot project based on this idea was undertaken in the spring semester of 2016.

For the last four years (including the current semester, spring 2017), undergraduate students in the World War I Seminar taught by the grant's Humanities Advisor Dr. Jennifer Keene have undertaken a transcription project of one personal letter collection in CAWL. Thus far, the students worked in the collections of C. Stanley Chapman, Charles Eoff, William and Lucille Fee, and Edmund Frick.

The project involves teaching the students to follow best practices in transcribing and keyword coding the letters. Once the students have completed these tasks, the work is then processed according to the defined workflow, with the files converted to archival pdfs and ultimately uploaded into Digital Commons. The entire transcription process (each student works with an average of 5-6 letters) takes two weeks in the course. Once the letters are available on Digital Commons, students use the entire collection—which is now keyword searchable—to complete research papers. The paper assignment requires the students to use the letters, a book on the US experience in World War I for historical context, and other course readings that offer an interpretation of letters from a non-American soldier. This assignment serves as a critical component of our four-part course sequence for History majors that culminates with a 50-page

senior thesis based on original research that is situated in a key historiographical debate. This seminar is the first course in that sequence and, therefore, is the first time that most students have ever visited an archive and dealt directly with original historical sources. At the same time, they can take advantage of having the letters digitized to write their papers using more than the 5-6 letters that they transcribed. It is a small assignment that models many of the skills that they need to acquire to complete their senior theses.

The pedagogical purpose of this assignment is to give the undergraduate students direct exposure to incorporating the use of primary sources into their intellectual development and scholarship. Because transcription is a valid pedagogical process for the students, it was decided that this course offered the perfect opportunity to pilot the possibility of incorporating student transcriptions into the larger CAWL digitization workflow.

However, reviews of the student work revealed that some was of very middling quality. A significant issue emerged: the current generation of undergraduate students has little experience reading handwritten documents. The number of letters that each student is assigned to work on (5-6) is meant to keep the project manageable. It is likely that the sample size is small enough the the students don't develop familiarity with a letter writer's individual "hand." Additionally, we discovered—even with the graduate students—that our transcription instructions allowed for too much individual interpretation. The combined evidence from the undergraduate course pilot project and a review of the work of our graduate students led us to revise our transcription instructions. This revision effort is described below.

Advisory Board Workshop & Outcomes

A deliverable from the *Plan of Work* was a workshop involving the members of our grant's Advisory Board. The day-long workshop took place on March 11, 2016. The intent of the workshop was to align our project's activities with digitization best practices. For institutions that are seeking guidance on holding their own workshop, the agenda that we developed is available in *Appendix I: Advisory Board Workshop Agenda*.

Initially, this activity was scheduled to occur during May-August 2015 (see *Appendix II: 2015-2016 CAWL Planning Grant Workplan*). After beginning the initial digitization activities (such as training of the graduate student researchers), it was decided to move this activity to later in the grant's scheduled timeline. This was done in order to gain more familiarity with materials, tools, and practices prior to sharing our experiences at the workshop.

The afternoon of the workshop was dedicated to receiving feedback from our assembled Advisory Board members with respect our project's practices and progress. A summary of the principal outcomes of the feedback session and our responses to that feedback are provided. Three members of our Advisory Board (Lisa Crane, Western Americana Manuscripts Librarian, Claremont University; Katie Richardson, Head of Special Collections and Archives, Cal Poly Pomona; and Shilpa Rele, Digital Program Librarian, Loyola Marymount University) and local stakeholders (Dr. Mary Litch, Director of Academic Technology and Digital Media and Dr. Joanna Levin, Chair of English Department) attended the workshop and provided our team with

feedback.

We received largely positive comments regarding the tools, techniques, and processes that we adopted for our digitization planning grant. There were, however, three issues that were brought to our attention during the afternoon feedback section: image quality, file naming conventions, and metadata workflow.

1. Scanning Resolution

The first issue that our advisory board noted concerned the scanning resolution adopted by our project. Prior to the workshop, all scans were being produced at 300 dpi. While this is a minimally acceptable setting for text documents, we were reminded that digitization best practices recommend 600 dpi resolution. The lower resolution storage setting was initially chosen as a byproduct of file size and storage. The feedback provided by our Advisory Board on this issue enabled the team to raise this issue with our campus Information Systems and Technology group. We successfully argued for more storage space, and we switched over to scanning at 600 dpi resolution.

2. File Naming

The second issue that our Advisory Board identified was our file naming scheme. A number of issues were identified. It was pointed out that our file naming convention was overly long and complicated. The file names were dozens of characters long. This, in turn, increased the opportunity for human error. Additionally, the naming scheme contained several bits of descriptive metadata. The scheme made reference to the physical container for the letter that was being scanned. The file names also included the date of the letter. This was problematic as many letters were undated, used different formats for dates, or were missing parts of dates. Finally, some collections contained multiple letters written on the same date. Each of these issues contributed to a significant amount of inconsistency in the way the files were being named.

These concerns were brought to our newest team member, archivist Lauren Menges, and she revised our file naming scheme. This revision was based on the material presented at a workshop at the Huntington Library that specifically addressed managing digital collections. The workshop covered the recommended best practices for file naming, including eliminating descriptive metadata from file names altogether and relying on a top-down, hierarchical system that proceeds from the top-level repository to the individual item-level. The newly adopted file naming scheme begins with the unique collection identifier. We then consecutively number the letters and pages within that collection. File names are significantly shorter, and the scheme eliminates previous decision making in terms of how to include different aspects of descriptive metadata.

3. Embedded Metadata

Finally, the last issue of concern identified by our Advisory Board was related to project's practice of embedding metadata in the digital artifacts.

Our current workflow calls for scans to be stored in the TIFF file format. The transcriptions of letters are produced in Microsoft Word. For metadata tagging, our project makes use of the

Adobe Extensible Metadata Platform (XMP). XMP originated in the visual resources world. These content sources—typically multiple scans and a single Word document—are assembled into a PDF/A document using Adobe Acrobat Pro. Acrobat Pro is also used to embed the metadata into the PDF/A document.

Feedback that we received at our workshop and from other experts whom we have consulted indicates that a more standard practice is to use an external metadata spreadsheet. One deciding factor for going with an embedded metadata format was to ensure that our digital artifacts were properly assigned metadata once they were outside of our archive.

An examination of the end-stage digital artifacts retrieved from our Digital Commons site has revealed that the metadata is stripped out of the artifacts by the BePress ingest process. The metadata is placed into a cover sheet that is the first page of the Digital Commons PDF document. Given these two factors, 1) that the embedded metadata doesn't work as we had originally intended with Digital Commons and 2) that the more typical practice is to use an external metadata spreadsheet, we are currently evaluating our practice in this area.

Ongoing Evaluations

Since the conclusion of the more formal evaluation of the project that took place during the Advisory Board Workshop, we have begun an internal, informal evaluation of the project in preparation for submitting our next grant proposal. Among the topics that we are in the process of reviewing are: the Digital Commons user interface, the Digitization Workflow, and the Transcription Process.

A great deal of our ongoing evaluation process has focused on the actual use of our Digital Commons repository as an access tool.

1. Digital Commons User Interface
In mid-October 2015, the team held a meeting to discuss how the Chapman University Digital Commons (http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu) could be used to archive and disseminate the digitized versions of the war letters. Originally selected to serve as our university's Institutional Repository (IR)—the home for digital versions of the scholarly and creative works of Chapman University's faculty, staff, and students—the system is implemented in bepress's Digital Commons software. This is a hosted solution that provides unlimited storage and back-up for our archived content.

Digital Commons provides long-term storage and backup. Files are backed up on bepress's own servers and then again by Iron Mountain. This provides another layer of assurance. A quarterly archive of all of our files is provided to us by bepress.

In Digital Commons, metadata records are mapped to Dublin Core, making it easy to harvest those records. After harvesting, the records are indexed in Google Scholar, SHARE (the Shared Access Research Ecosystem), WorldCat, Discover, and other major search engines. Digital Commons supports the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH

2.0). This enables the metadata records from our collections to be integrated into systems like Calisphere (https://calisphere.org/) and the Digital Public Library of America (https://dp.la/).

Digital Commons makes files open access by default, but we can restrict access to Chapman University users where IP issues present concerns. Digitized letters can be restricted at either the collection or item levels. Restricted letters would be available to those with a verified Chapman University log-in. Our subscription module would also allow us to add outside researchers via email address on a case-by-case basis.

As a pilot test of using Digital Commons, many of the letters that were digitized during the performance of this grant were uploaded into Digital Commons, and they are now accessible through through a CAWL specific landing page (http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/wla/). To date, 29 CAWL collections are available for download.

As a part of our ongoing evaluation of the project, we examined the look and feel of the collections that were archived as a part of the pilot program. The bepress system offers a level of configurability, and the layout selected for the pilot program is called a *Series* (a screenshot is in *Appendix III. Digital Commons Series layout*). While discussing this particular user interface during a recent meeting, the group's consensus was that it was text-heavy and somewhat off-putting. It was decided to create a test collection using a layout style known as a *Book Gallery* (seen in *Appendix IV. Digital Commons Book Gallery layout*). The project team felt that the new layout was preferable. The team particularly liked the inclusion of a thumbnail image in the *Book Gallery* interface. For anyone who would like to compare the two layouts, the *Book Gallery* can be found at http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/aparsons_correspondence and the original *Series* layout is at http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/aparsons_collection.

2. Workflow Simplification
Another part of the evaluation process of the digitization project included a review of our digitization workflow. This review occurred as a by-product of archivist Lauren Menges training a new student worker. This process revealed a significant inefficiency in our current workflow.

The primary change that was made to the digitization workflow was to move the transcription process ahead of the metadata creation activities. By completing the transcription first, it forces the scanning technician to apply a close reading of the letter. By going through this process, the person develops a greater familiarity with the contents of the letter, after which that individual is therefore more able to efficiently and accurately apply the metadata.

3. Transcription Process
Of the 29 CAWL collections that are currently available in the Digital Commons archive, three distinct groups have contributed the transcriptions: 1. graduate student researcher Nick Dante; 2. graduate student researcher Lauren Cruz; and 3. students from the undergraduate History seminar of Humanities Advisor Dr. Jennifer Keene. A review of the digitized letters that were retrieved from Digital Commons revealed significant divergences in transcription practices of the three groups. Given the constraints of introducing the transcription process in a classroom setting, it isn't particularly surprising that the resulting student works had a non-standard, almost

chaotic feel.

What was surprising was that the graduate student researchers had interpreted the transcription instructions so differently. As an example, please look at the Albert W. Parsons letter in *Appendix V: Pages from Albert W. Parsons Letter*. Here, we have the not terribly unusual example of two distinct pages of a letter being represented on that same side of a single sheet of writing paper. One of our graduate student researchers, Lauren Cruz, interpreted the transcription instructions as allowing for rendering of both pages of the transcription in a single page of a Word document using a two-column format (*Appendix VI: Transcription of Pages from Albert W. Parsons Letter*). Our other graduate student researcher, Nick Dante, preferred to map a single page of a letter to a single page in Word (*Appendix VI: Transcription of Pages from Jack P. Bell Letter*). In addition, highlighted regions in both of the transcriptions reveal differences in the use of bracketing to denote information that isn't contained in the manuscript. Unfortunately, the instructions that we adopted for the project allowed for either decision.

In order to constrain the decision-making process and thereby yield transcriptions with a higher degree of similarity, Nick Dante revised the Transcription process document. The new document has been heavily updated with specific scenarios that may be encountered, and it also includes a sample transcription.

Don't Reinvent the Copyright/IP Wheel

Developing a copyright/intellectual property decision model was an item in our *Plan of Work*. The project investigators discussed possible solutions at a number of early team meetings. At one of those meetings, the the [UCLA Library Special Collections Digital Project Toolkit](#) was mentioned as a possible solution.

In October 2015, we met with the creators of the UCLA Toolkit. As a part of the evaluation process—Heather Briston (UCLA's University Archivist and an attorney)—provided a half-day workshop for the grant team in February 2016. The topics covered at the workshop were as follows: copyright basics, workflow introduction, information gathering, risk assessment matrix, risk assessment report, review process, and fair use statements. At the conclusion of the workshop, it was obvious to team members that this was the right solution for our project. We saved a significant amount of the team's time by simply consulting with other, more experienced practitioners.

Conclusion

CAWL Founding Director Andrew Carroll recently announced the Million Letters Campaign (http://www.chapman.edu/research-and-institutions/cawl/Million-Letters-Campaign.aspx). Since the announcement of the new program, hundreds of new letters have been arriving each day. For the month of April 2017, nearly six-thousand original letters were donated to CAWL. This more than justifies the effort that will be required to create a sustainable digitization program.

Appendix I: Advisory Board Workshop Agenda

Workshop participants	Workshop agenda & presentations
CAWL/WLA NEH Grant Workshop Attendees	**CAWL/WLA NEH Grant Workshop Schedule**
	Workshop held, Friday, 3/11/16--Leatherby Libraries conference room, LL420
Presenters:	8:30 Arrival and Continental Breakfast
Doug Dechow	9:00 Dean Charlene Baldwin—Welcome
Rand Boyd	9:15 Doug Dechow—Grant overview and Project Management
Julie Artman	9:30 Rand Boyd—Digitization Workflow and Metadata Creation
Brett Fisher	9:45 Julie Artman—Donor agreement
Kristin Laughtin-Dunker	9:50 Brett Fisher—Digital Archives Technology Decisions
Lauren Cruz	10:05 Break
Nick Dante	10:20 Kristin Laughtin-Dunker—Digital Commons and Web presence
Jana Remy	10:35 Lauren Cruz—Archive to Class to Publication PDF PPT
	10:50 Nick Dante—Bell Collection
Advisory Board:	11:05 Jana Remy—Using CAWL as an Introduction to Digital Humanities
Lisa Crane	11:20 Break
Katie Richardson	11:30 California's Gold Exhibit and Huell Howser Archive tour—Charlene Baldwin
Shilpa Rele	11:45 CAWL tour—Andrew Carroll
	12:00 Special Collections: The Letters and Digitization lab—Rand Boyd
Local attendees:	12:15 Lunch (in LL420)
Charlene Baldwin	1:15 Guest talk—Shilpa Rele, Digital Program Librarian, Loyola Marymount University
Kevin Ross	1:30 Feedback session—Kevin Ross
Mary Litch	2:30 Break
Brian Song	2:45 Feedback discussion—Rand Boyd and Doug Dechow to lead discussion
Andy Carroll	3:30 Workshop ends
Comments (0)	

Appendix II: Planning Grant Workplan

GOALS	2014-15 PHASE I: PRELIMINARY ACTIVITIES												2015-16 PHASE II: GRANT ACTIVITIES												
	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May
Identify conservation issues with collection (rb)			ONGOING																						
Complete finding aid and upload online (rb)																									
Identify collections (2,000 pgs.) for digitization (rb/jr)																									
Digitize in-house collection of 2,000 pages (bf/bs)																									
Devise and Hold Workshop (drd)																									
Digital Humanities pedagogical resource (jr)																									
Create copywrite IP decision model (team)				ONGOING																					
Best practices white paper (drb/rb/jr)																									
Present at conferences (drd/rb/jr/bf)																									

Appendix III: Digital Commons Series Layout

ALBERT PARSONS FIRST WORLD WAR CORRESPONDENCE COLLECTION

This collection contains letters from Albert Parsons to his cousin's wife, Laura Stanley, during World War One. Parsons served in the American Expeditionary Forces. It is revealed that in one of the letters from Parsons that Laura Stanley wanted to write letters to one of his fellow soldiers, so Parsons chose Mack E. Franklin in his group. Albert Parsons was friends with Mack E. Franklin (collection #2014.016.w.r)

Follow

Jump to:

Letters ▾

Letters

PDF [2014.160.w.r_Parsons_worldwarone_1919-01-04_006.pdf] Albert Parsons First World War Correspondence Collection, Al W. Parsons

PDF [2014.160.w.r_Parsons_worldwarone_1918-04-27_005.pdf] Albert Parsons First World War Correspondence Collection, Al W. Parsons

Appendix IV: Digital Commons Book Gallery Layout

ALBERT W. PARSONS FIRST WORLD WAR CORRESPONDENCE COLLECTION

This collection contains letters from Albert Parsons to his cousin's wife, Laura Stanley, during World War One. Parsons served in the American Expeditionary Forces. It is revealed that in one of the letters from Parsons that Laura Stanley wanted to write letters to one of his fellow soldiers, so Parsons chose Mack E. Franklin in his group. Albert Parsons was friends with Mack E. Franklin (collection #2014.016.w.r)

Foll

[ ] Switch View   [ ] View Slideshow
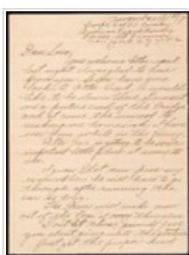
Albert W. Parsons Correspondence #1
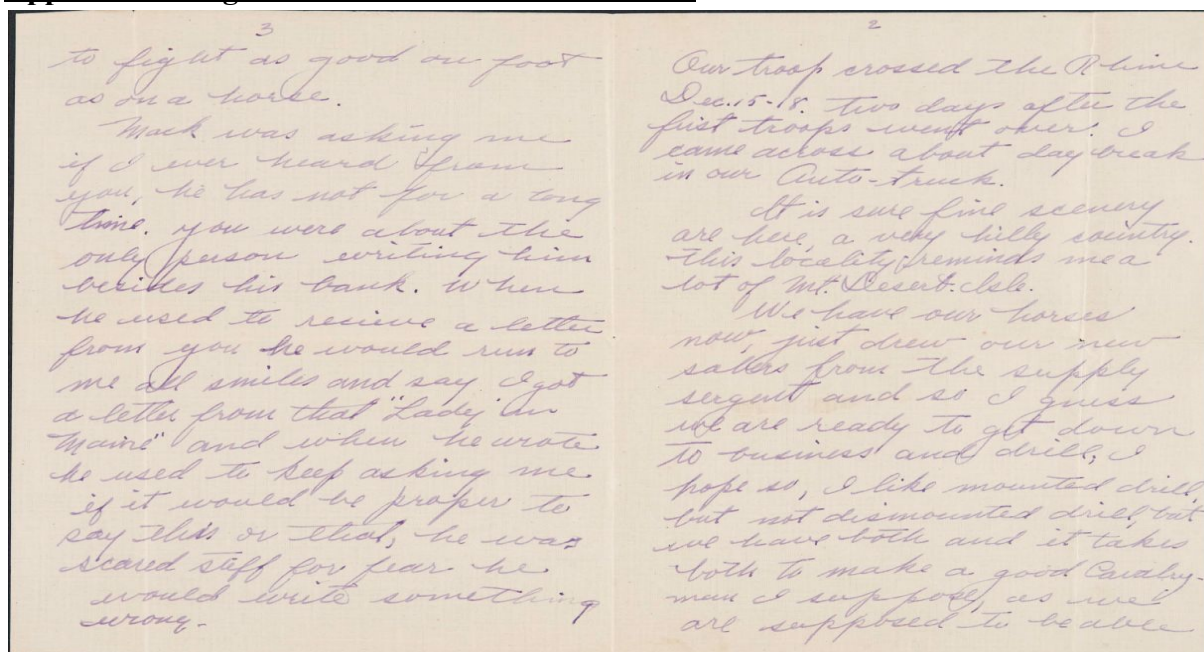
Albert W. Parsons

Albert W. Parsons Correspondence #2

Albert W. Parsons

Appendix V: Pages from Albert W. Parsons Letter

Appendix VI: Transcription of Pages from Albert W. Parsons Letter

Lauren Cruz 10.23.2015

[Page 2 – Letter continued]

3	2
to fight as good on foot	Our troop crossed the Rhine
as on a horse.	Dec. 15 – 18. two days after the
Mack was asking me	first troops went over. I
if I ever heard from	came across about day break
you, he has not for a long	in our Auto-truck.
time. You were about the	It is sure fine scenery
only person writing him	are here, a very hilly country.
besides his bank. When	this locality reminds me a
he used to recieve [sic] a letter	lot of Mr. Desert. Isle.

Appendix VI: Transcription of Pages from Jack P. Bell Letter

[[Nick Dante 1/14/16]]

[[Page 2- Letter]]

Nov 19

Darling Fink,

Well, Baby Dear, another day has passed and its one day closer to that good one. I sure hope it won't be too long now. Every Saturday at 1:30 there is some fellow that comes on the air that tells where all the divisions are and when they are comming home and when to expect each point group. And he said that all men that were not in occupation forces would be home by the middle of January. Oh, Darling, I certainly hope he's right.

Sweetie, I looked all over for shorts and the only ones I could find are $1.95 and figure that is a little too high for them so your mother said she would make some for you. And I believe they will be better than what you can buy now.

I didn't do much of anything over the weekend. Sat. night I was over to Lena + Bens. There really much doing but I hate to stay home of Sat. I went over to your folks yesterday and it was such a beautiful day we went for a ride. Maybe, Darling it wont be too long before we can go for rides to-gether.

I'm always looking forward to those happy days. We will have such a wonderful time, no matter what we do, just as long as we can be to- gether. I love you